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Emotional challenges and pre-placement preparations: a cross-disciplinary, longitudinal study of 'learner-worker' undergraduates (in an Irish HEI)

Abstract

The aim of this cross-disciplinary, longitudinal qualitative study was to gain insight into the experiences of a small but diverse group of undergraduates experiencing work placement, looking particularly to their emotional responses before and after their time in the workplace. The eight undergraduates were studying at a Higher Education Institute (HEI) in north west Ireland, across four different programmes. They were interviewed at length¹ pre and post placement and completed reflective learning journals as part of this research project. Analysis of the data collected confirms that rigorous preparations pre-placement – aimed at addressing student fears and uncertainties - are essential to assuaging their anxieties, especially those which might not always be easily foreseen by tutors, or indeed fully articulated by the 'learner-worker.' Though limited in some sense by its small scale and geographical location, the findings still highlight generic issues which are by no means exclusive to Irish Higher Education (HE). Ireland's HE-sector is quite akin to that of the UK, insofar as it has close ties to the economy: a 'joined up,' dialogic approach can frame undergraduate placements as 'one of the early mechanisms for initiating partnerships between HE and industry' (Sheridan and Linehan, 2011, 2). The literature review supports the project's two-fold, core research question: '*How effectively do work placements 'bridge the gap' between campus and workplace?*' and '*How might we prepare our students emotionally for work placement?*' Several key themes emerge

¹ Interviews generally lasted for 60-90 minutes

from the data, namely: expectations and preparation; clarity of contexts, remits and roles; and differing perceptions of 'learning gain(s)' (Gossman et al, 2018). The findings suggest that many employer-valued, transferable skills (e.g. self-confidence, psychological resilience, and emotional maturity) might be gained or further honed via workplace learning, but that placement *quality* - much like the 'student journey' itself – often varies significantly, not least from the perspective of the anxious student. A draft checklist - aimed at mentors, tutors and course leaders - is also suggested here.

1. Introduction

'...opportunities to develop independence and self-confidence, and ability to put their theoretical knowledge into practice.' (Sheridan & Linehan, *Work Placements in Third-Level Programmes*, REAP, 2011, 4)

Work placement can engender employer-prized learning gains and encourage the emergence of 'ideal graduates' (Blackwell et al, 2000; Boud and Middleton, 2003; Mason et al, 2006; Cable and Willets, 2012). Robust pre-placement training is essential however, in terms of offering emotional support, promoting emotional maturity, and bolstering mental resilience; rigorous, profession-specific preparation can also minimize potential confusion or miscommunications over undergraduate/mentor roles and remits. This small-scale, longitudinal, two-year study analysed the experiences and on-reflection perceptions of eight Irish undergraduates undertaking assessed work placement. Conducted as part of an MRes thesis, it involved four different profession-facing programmes (Law, Dental Nursing, Pharmacy Technician, Veterinary Nursing) delivered at an HEI in north west Ireland. (Table i). Its aim was to discover whether placement might bridge the various gaps between campus and

workplace, namely, inexperience, emotional vulnerability, lack of 'industry'/professional knowledge, and unfamiliarity with workplace norms. Though small in scale, the case study findings are detailed: they suggest that most 'learner-workers' will often develop a more holistic sense of their own 'graduateness' (Orrell, 2004; Steur et al, 2012), gaining greater resilience, emotional intelligence and adaptability (Shagini et al, 2018). This seldom occurs automatically however. Rather, honest self-reflection upon one's own behaviours, skills and competencies (Blackwell, et al 2000, 16) remains key.

Generic notions of the 'employable student' or 'ideal employee,' often ignore key issues such class, race or gender (Allen et al, 2013) or socio-economic background. Work placements – or the lack of access to them - can serve to entrench inherent societal inequalities, with students from more affluent backgrounds often more able to complete more prestigious or unpaid internships. This study, though small in scale, does at least present the views of students from different social backgrounds, genders and age groups. As the literature suggests, employability is often improved via placement (Orrell, 2004; Tomlinson, 2008) even within highly competitive, modern job markets and despite ongoing global austerities (Zelenev, 2017). Employers demand evidence of work-readiness beyond that of the university degree (Frankham, 2016), expecting emotional maturity and mental resilience from new recruits. (Dacre Pool et al, 2019). As such, the issue of how students preconceive (or misconceive) the nature and remit of their role(s) when 'out' on work placement, clearly merits closer, continuing scrutiny (Tomlinson, 2008). Negative placement experiences can, as seen here, perhaps deter students from their chosen pathway, adversely affecting 'learner identity' and lowering self-esteem, perhaps turning them off HE altogether (Irving-Bell, 2019). And yet, undergraduate work placements remain an important component of

many 'good' student experiences or journeys (Smith et al, 2007; Mendez and Rona, 2010; Mansfield, 2011; Jones et al., 2012). Student perspectives matter, not least in terms of being granted sufficient, supported autonomy during placement, whether via observational or supervised work activities, as this paper will argue. In sum, learner-workers, placement students often struggle off-campus, needing well-crafted and bespoke, profession-specific training pre-placement (whether intra-modular or extra-mural) and substantial pastoral care during it, to cope with unfamiliar challenges and manage their emotional responses to them.

2. A review of the recent literature

'While there is clearly a need to educate students on the theoretical aspects of their intended profession, classroom bound delivery limits the integration of theory and practice; a key element of developing work-readiness skills.' (Ferns and Moore, 2012, 208)

The notion of graduate employability has been much analysed, if not always fully defined, through empirical research and theoretical scholarship (Harvey, 2001; Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). Seldom seen as generic, the concept seems increasingly fluid, grounded in displays that evidence 'capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.' (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). It remains difficult to frame enhanced employability in broad, basic terms. The UK's graduate labour market, for example, is 'complex because it exists within a wider labour market ...affected by changes in both the UK and global economies' (AGCAS, 2012). Differing demands attach to the various professions/industries that HEIs must prepare students for; an increasingly nebulous 'graduate premium,' (Rospigliosi et al, 2014; Cook et al, 2019) means that high quality placements still offer considerable advantage. Most HEI 'employability brands' are still grounded in 'psychological

contract[s]' between learner, employer and tutor (Rothwell et al, 2009, 159) with year-long sandwich placements being particularly prestigious (Mendez and Rona, 2010), often leading to graduate-level opportunities post-university (Atfield et al., 2009; Mansfield, 2011, 931). Networking opportunities, increased self-confidence and independence (Wilton, 2014; Yorke, 2016) can also heighten emotional intelligence (Jameson et al, 2016). The idea of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) clearly still matters too: students expect – indeed deserve - adequate supervision and placement mentorships that foster deep learning.

Informal modes of learning often go unacknowledged however, perhaps considered too basic or not sufficiently intrinsic to the job, or simply seen as social etiquette e.g. punctuality, diligence, politeness (Boud and Middleton, 2003, 194). These do however evidence an '...increased maturity and personal skills as well as greater subject knowledge...identifying and optimising the 'placement effect' (Mansfield, 2011, 934). Significantly too, '...for most employees, work engages the person's need to be appreciated and belong' (Baumann, 2009, 173). Support and mutual trust are key also to finding the 'right level of challenge' (Eraut, 2007, 418) for learners: being over-challenged is as detrimental to morale as being under-challenged. Tutors and workplace mentors must therefore 'attend to those factors which enhance or hinder individual or group learning.' (Eraut, 2007, 421). As argued here, placements vary considerably in terms of quality and challenges (Blackwell et al, 2000).² As Sheridan and Linehan's (2011) 'toolkit' suggested in respect of Irish Higher Education (HE),

² Blackwell, et al (2000, 6) further contend that when comparison is made between the academic records of recent graduates and those from some years ago there is considerable variation depending on which subjects are studied, and the nature of the work experience undertaken.

base-level three-way agreements between college, learner and placement-provider can often prevent many communicational or quality issues.

Tying in with this is the need for rigorous preparation pre-placement, to address knowledge-related gaps (Turner, 2014) and encourage meaningful learner reflection both during and after (Glover et al, 2002). Placement evidences wider student experiences, ensuring student journeys are not simply uniform. Though challenging, they merge students' hopes and fears in unfamiliar contexts (Freestone et al, 2006, 238) and can ensure that transformative learning goes beyond basic upskilling (Choy, 2009). Significantly, all of the students involved in Ireland's REAP project considered placement 'a positive unique learning experience, which was a good fit with their third-level programme and helped prepare them for their future careers' (Sheridan and Linehan, 2011, 4). Issues still arose however, e.g. funding, transport, accommodation, and unclear expectations (from employer and student alike) and the too-short duration of some placements. Certain experiences may be further 'under-conceptualised because they are not formally connected to considered theories of learning and employability' (Knight & Yorke, 2003, 5). Variations will always exist however in terms of quantity (duration, hours, etc) and quality (activities, student perceptions); some elements of placement will similarly always disconnect learners from other aspects of their degree programme. As this paper will argue, pastoral care and rigorous preparations are therefore key.

3. Methods

'...predetermined questions [where] the order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanation given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included' (Robson, 2002, 270).

In terms of impact, the research had its limitations. Although the scope of the study did not permit direct liaison with the actual placement providers/employers mentoring the students (thereby preventing triangulation, but clearly necessary to preserve the students' anonymity in a small community and to comply with data protection regulations) it still offers valuable in terms of student perceptions and the potential pitfalls of work placements. It is still fair to argue that via case studies we often 'learn a little something ...about something we are interested in. On the basis of that little something, we construct a complete story of the phenomenon' (Ragin and Becker, 1992, 211). Conceptual insights can also flow from qualitative research: unearthing individual emotional responses to workplace challenges can deepen our understanding of student learning (Fishman et al, 2003) and of key events (Cohen et al, 2011). If 'the unexpected should emerge,' then this can contribute to the literature on the topic under scrutiny (Harland, 2014) and allow for divergence of opinion in terms of which questions ought to be asked. Case studies allow too for the gathering of results that are easily grasped by a variety of audiences (Nisbet and Watt, 1984). If methodologies build also on philosophical principles rather than empirical investigation, then Narrative Inquiry (Riessman, 2008) is appropriate, especially where a study is set within 'human stories of experience' (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Thus, the researcher can look to what *ought* to be, rather than at what currently exists (Boote, 2008).

The mixed methods approach ('before and after' interviews plus documentary analysis of reflective learning diaries) permits detailed picture-building, in terms of seeing how each learner-worker fared, and whether/how their expectations were met, or otherwise. The design was sufficiently flexible to allow individuals to focus on particular

aspects of their experience, not least their hopes, fears, regrets and triumphs.³ Key questions were informed by the thematic areas identified in the literature review, followed up by sub-questions as per best practice (Briggs et al, 2012).⁴ The pre and post placement interviews therefore drew particularly upon ‘themes of reflection and linkages’ (Smith et al, 2007), including such questions as:

- a. *How did you perceive your in-college preparation for the work placement, and what were your expectations?*
- b. *What impact[s] do you think the placement might have upon your future employability and/or academic performance?*

The data presented here highlight where improvements might be made e.g. in terms of managing student expectations and anxieties via robust preparations pre-placement, and improving communications between student, college, mentor, and placement provider. In terms of the limitations of this small-scale study, it did adhere to the norms of ‘qualitative research,’ involving ‘intense and/or prolonged contact with a “field” or life situation...typically “banal” or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations.’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994,6). Qualitative research enables the study of complex issues; often, responses

³ A focus group pre-study ensured that research questions were sufficiently clear in terms of language and appropriate in relation to student knowledge, pre-placement. This pilot exercise did not form part of the final research but helped formulate the core research questions and refine key themes. In respect of their reflective learning diaries, students recorded daily observations (Gibbs, 1988), to assess the extent to which their experiences accorded with Orrell’s (2004) approach (‘deliberate and intentional’ learning) grounded in a comprehensive induction of students and supervisors, ensuring a high standard duty of care (Washbourn, 1996).

⁴ The four professional pathways (Law, Dental Nursing, Veterinary Nursing, Pharmacy Technician Studies) were chosen following lengthy discussions with programme leaders, on the basis that these were likely to offer often stressful placement scenarios, requiring stamina, resilience, and maturity of outlook, plus basic skills and knowledge. Following ethical approval, selection of respondents (two per discipline) was done on the basis of a random call for volunteers, made by programme leaders. (See Table 1) Additional support and information were also made available to participants, upon request.

are given that can lead to more profound understandings. Following an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 248) permitted fairly detailed capture and evaluation of participants' hindsight views and subsequent reflections. Framing work-based learning as both processual and directly experienced (Merriam, 1992) was also a factor: a large number of participants was not essential given the narrow, close focus of the study and the level of detail gleaned via interviews and learning diaries. Case selection of the four disciplines - rather than sampling - also offered much scope for close scrutiny (Stake, 1995); small samples of diverse individuals can reveal significant similarities across disparate scenarios (Quinn- Patton, 1990). Participants were encouraged to reflect honestly and holistically upon their experiences, positive or otherwise. Put briefly, this study analysed the psychological aspects of placement with an interpretivist approach looking at how participants' perceptions and preconceptions shaped their 'realities' (Merriam, 1992; Scott and Morrison, 2006; Briggs, Coleman and Morrison, 2012).⁵ The interviews here were exploratory in nature, seeking out the 'whys' and 'hows' of placement and offering detailed descriptions of actual events with substantive reflection by participants (Yin, 2013). Open-ended interview questions reflected the following themes:

1. *Student Expectations, Emotions and Preparations:* How did they perceive the preparation they received - or undertook - for the work placement, in terms of their expectations?

⁵ As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) further observed, case studies look for significant, unique occurrences grounded in reality, such as the relationships and the exchanges between individuals (Nisbet and Watt, 1984). Unforeseen events might arise during the course of a work placement: this methodology allowed for analytical comparisons, offering useful data and practical insights (Eisenhardt, 1989). Though case studies may often generate hypothetical theories rather than offering reality-based suggestions for policy reform (Flyvbjerg, 2006), it can be argued that 'theory and practice may not be distinct spheres ... humans naturally theorize and may act on such theories in practice' (Harland, 2014). Personal theories can still guide practitioners and policy-makers (Schön, 1987), while case studies can avoid the usual 'conceptual or methodological boundaries' which 'constrain an inquiry and each project, [and] if done well, involve... some form of discovery as new knowledge and theory' (Harland, 2014). Similarly, whilst quantitative studies might look for example to *whether* a 'placement effect' exists, these do not necessarily answer the question of *why* such an effect might exist (Mansfield, 2011, 941).

2. *Contexts and Roles*: What was the nature of the work placement, and what was their remit?

3. *Learning Gain*: How did they perceive their learning whilst in the work place? Did they feel the work placement would link to/improve their academic performance?

4. *Enhanced Employability*: What impact did they think the placement would have on their future employability prospects?

5. *Reflections and Recommendations*: In respect of emotional responses, were there any recommendations or key observations?

4. Findings: Pre-placement anxieties, post-placement reflections

'I'd just be concerned about others, and myself, that if you're told to do something, and you're not actually getting the benefit of learning, why should we be there?' (Respondent B, pre-placement interview)

'...how to act professionally and to have the chance to observe....how things are done in real life. The college setting is great, and it provides you with the tools that you might need to go out there and have a successful career, but there's no substitute for experience either. You have to really know how to apply it out in the real world.' (Respondent E, reflective journal entry)

Pre-placement, all of the students expected to gain in self-confidence (Sheridan and Linehan, 2011) and resilience (Dacre-Pool et al, 2019; profession-relevant knowledge was seen as a primary 'learning gain' (Gossman et al, 2018): *'It gives you a better idea of whether you want to go into that line of work, or [whether] you want to do something different.* (Respondent A). Most recognised the value of the exercise in terms of enhancing their employability and ultimate 'graduateness' (Orrell, 2004; Steur et al, 2012): *'I will absorb some of the skills necessary to successfully pursue a legal*

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3 *career... It's going to put me through the roof I think...experience is very important.'*

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5 (Respondent E). Others expressed significant fears and concerns: ⁶

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11 *'...at the end of the day, if you are looking to get a job in the future, and it's*
12 *a very small field or area, everybody is going to know everybody. So, if*
13 *you've done well, hopefully it will look good for you at the end. If you do*
14 *terrible, chances of getting a job will be slim.'* (Respondent G)

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16
17 All offered fairly generic definitions of employability, best summarised perhaps by
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19 Respondent D: *'...co-operate with your colleagues...and get along with people.'*

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21
22 Several hoped their placement might lead to tangible improvements in both their
23
24 employability levels and academic performance: *'I'm going to be working with a*
25 *barrister. I'm going to observe as much as I can and try and apply that to my studies.'*

26
27 (Respondent E). Despite largely positive hopes and expectations, half of the group
28
29 were clearly very anxious (Respondents B, C, D and E) over leaving the 'comfort zone'
30
31 of the college environment. As the reflective learning entries further confirmed, all had
32
33 struggled to adjust to non-academic, professional environments. Such emotional
34
35 challenges were however eventually seen as key to promoting 'work-ready' resiliency
36
37 and 'whole person ...experiential learning' (Eden, 2014). Successfully managing one's
38
39 emotions in the workplace is a fundamental skill (Morris and Feldman, 1997); tutors
40
41 must ensure that students view the concept of employability as holistic in nature, with
42
43 'sufficiently robust' preparations looking to create and manage reasonable
44
45 expectations across the triad of employer, learner and tutor/mentor (Dale and James,
46
47 2015). 'Active learning' was understood by all of the undergraduates to be 'anything
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49 that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing'
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⁶ One student had come close to leaving placement, when a member of staff wrongly accused them of having misappropriated items. The matter was resolved fairly quickly however, and the student exonerated.

(Bonwell and Eison, 1991, 2). Predicting limitations beforehand (e.g. in terms of role, remit and tasks) can serve however as an important bridging device between academia and the workplace (De Vos and De Hauw, 2010). Profound anxiety arose for some, despite preparatory classes:

Our preparation is one class a week for five weeks...so how much are you going to learn, and how much are you actually going to retain in that time? You can know the basics but... I don't feel like I know an awful lot to be honest. (Respondent G).

Initial confusion over the required working hours, was a factor also: *'We're told that we have 30 hours to do a week. Then our dental nurse is telling us that you go by what the dentist tells you to go by.'* (Respondent G) Another was unsure as to where exactly placement would occur, despite feeling fairly well prepared otherwise: *'...anything could happen. There's lots of things that we haven't obviously covered that they could be doing there, and I would have no idea.'* (Respondent H) Generally, concerns were addressed and assuaged by tutors, with some initially sceptical attitudes (e.g. on the benefits of reflective learning journals) apparently turning to resigned pragmatism by the placement's end: *'It's just putting all your theory and what you learn into practice, and to know what is expected of you.'* (Respondent B). Subsequent reflection did bring greater awareness of challenges faced (Shapiro, 2009) but also revealed some lingering barriers between 'student and staff systems' (Dale and James 2015, 96). This was particularly so where students might have seen placement as something to be endured or actively avoided. Viewing themselves as workplace learners (rather than as temporary staff or unpaid interns) encouraged the sense of joining a professional 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998; Boud and Middleton, 2003). This was in spite of widespread fears of being 'throw[n]... in at the deep end' (Respondent E), with one

participant especially concerned over employer 'exploitation' (i.e. by doing unpaid work):

'...I'd be afraid that employers would take advantage...see it as, this is an extra 30 hours that we have someone here. We can get them to clean the floor and mop out the kennels or whatever, which does have to be done, and I understand that. But my concerns would be that people won't stand up for themselves, and they'll end up just getting thrown into a corner. (Respondent B)

There was considerable variation between preparation experiences 'depending on subjects studied and the nature of the work experience' (Blackwell et al, 2000:16). Some were terrified by their own lack of knowledge on how professionalism might be defined, given that must enter a *'... professional world and a professional setting. I don't think I would be very well versed in how to be professional. Whatever it is. I just don't know how to get that or gain that.'* (Respondent E). Despite having self-organised her placement, she feared the loss of support in a new, *'...strange environment, and not having my friends around. I rely on my friends quite a bit here in the college.'* Ultimately, all were able to self-manage such fears of abandonment and cope with unexpected problems e.g. a timetabling clash with a much-needed part-time job:

'...no harm to anybody, but I'm not going to lose my job over the head of work experience...they've been good enough to rearrange my days around my schedule and keep me employed. It's not even a case that I'll be working under the hours, because it's 30 hours a week. That's three days. It's just that I don't want them to be thinking that I'm lazy.' (Respondent G)

Regulating emotions within the workplace was a significant aspect (Morris and Feldman, 1997) with enhanced maturity (Ashkanasy et al 2002; Shapiro, 2009) evident for the majority by the end of placement. Psychological resilience was gained via their 'deep learning' off campus (Little and Harvey, 2006) and viewed as one of several core competencies (Rees et al, 2006). As Orrell (2004) stressed, placements must be as

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3 'deliberate and intentional' as possible, offering comprehensive induction to minimize
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5 anxieties, uncertainty and unintentional biases. Roles and remits must be clearly
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7 defined early on: learner-workers cannot be expected to act as fully-fledged
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9 professionals, nor should they be allocated overly-challenging, complex tasks (Allen
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11 et al, 2013). And yet, an effective work experience must include meaningful activities
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13 (Britzman, 2003): simply 'working' might not produce sufficiently 'transformational
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15 learning' (Blackwell et al, 2000; Choy, 2009) as was evidenced here. Emotions were
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17 quite strong, including frustration or annoyance at, for example, a perceived lack of
18
19 instruction or supervision, or insufficient activity), delight (at having successfully
20
21 completed challenging tasks), or abject fear at having to self-source information
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23 needed to cope with unfamiliar settings and scenarios (Respondents A,B,C,E,H).
24
25 Resilience and adaptability was therefore key: as one stressed, she had gained self-
26
27 sufficiency, by being:
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33 *'....self-activated...I was just given a booklet and I have no idea what order the documents*
34 *went in. ...you do learn it yourself, a lot of it...with regard to the files that I would be reading*
35 *in the solicitor's office, the solicitor just hands me a file and says read this, or highlight the*
36 *correspondence on this date, or medical appointments from this month or whatever.*
37 *(Respondent F)*
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42 Observational learning (Garrick, 1998) brought benefits too (for Respondents A, B, E,
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44 G, H) in terms of increasing self-confidence levels and communication skills, via
45
46 engagement with colleagues and clients/customers. That said, several saw limitations
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48 with this form of learning, wanting greater autonomy and responsibilities: *'I was really*
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50 *there more in an observation sort of a role than actually completing tasks...I could*
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52 *have been more challenged than I was.'* (Respondent F) She had volunteered to type
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54 up letters, on the basis that she had IT skills and prior work experience but was instead
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56 tasked with reading files and going to court on a 'watching brief.' She did not voice
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these concerns at the time however, which is significant, nor did she record them in her journal. As Eden (2014, 267) argued, placement students may feel inclined to give overly-favourable feedback, influenced by the benefits of positive hindsight or 'with the gaining of credits in mind.' She was reluctant to raise the issue with her tutor or workplace mentor:

'...15% of my overall mark goes for a learner placement report completed by my [mentor]... I don't want to get on the wrong side of my mentor. I want a good mark for it....you couldn't say anything bad about it. You couldn't really give any negative comments, because at the end of the day...you're not going to jeopardise your mark by giving the truth if that's how it is.'

Another outlined similar difficulties:

...it was kind of boring. We just had to tidy shelves and stuff that you wouldn't really want to be doing as a pharmacy technician. I didn't really like the hospital because of those problems... I think they need to improve the students' work. ...some people weren't very helpful... We just kind of stayed out of their way .. They wouldn't ask us to do anything, or they wouldn't ask us if we would come with them to the wards or anything. ...I've learned that I don't want to work in the hospital anyway. It's too boring..' (Respondent D)

Her second block of placement had proven more fruitful however in terms of requiring her to be '*..very busy all the time. You kind of knew what you were doing.*' Another placed the blame for her boredom squarely upon her workplace supervisors:

I think they just think it's too much hassle to try and teach somebody, to take them on. Well how am I supposed to learn? How am I supposed to get a job if somebody doesn't actually teach me? If we're not taught, then basically in two years' time when we graduate, we're just going to be graduating and we'll not know half of what we should do. (Respondent C)

She felt quite strongly that more information could have been provided in advance:

When I went in there, I didn't know what I was doing. Nothing was explained to us. I just had to do it all. They would assist us for the first week. We had to observe. But apart from that, I didn't know what I was going to be doing in there. I just went in and I had to follow the way it was.

Clearly, 'transformative learning' requires more than check-listing practical skills (Choy, 2009, 66) and managing expectations (Freestone et al, 2006, 237). Reflections on emotional responses can provoke useful insights: '*... there were moments where I found myself struggling. I didn't mind that I felt this way though and found it quite amusing at times...similar to a Chihuahua sitting amongst a pride of lions.*' (Respondent E). Challenges generally were outlined in useful, candid detail (C,D, E and F) with all expressing a sense of pride in having completed placement. As Respondent G noted, despite initial misgivings, the experience was '*...100%..worthwhile... it was a learning experience, and I did take a lot of stuff away from it.*' Others overcame issues such as travel and time management:

I found it really hard to get up and down to placement every week, and then come back and be in good form for college at half nine the next morning. It was a challenge, but it was something as I said that I was aware of at the beginning and I was willing to make it work. (Respondent F).

Significantly, not all appreciated that certain mundane tasks can enable the more dramatic aspects of practice; those who did so also demonstrated greater resilience, emotional maturity, and industry awareness. Their enthusiasm, and a realistic grasp of their own limited knowledge and abilities, were key to their viewing placement as a valuable *learning* experience, capable of being translated into a tangible bundle of employer-valued skills. Proper levels of supervision clearly matter (Ladany et al, 2013): by the end of the process, *all* had indicated, upon reflection, that they had 'upskilled' even if this had not been immediately apparent to all of them, pre or mid-process (i.e. Respondents C,D, E and G). Some felt that they should have been completing tasks on a par with the qualified workers (e.g. B, D, E, F). All conceded that the experience underscored the links between classroom-learned, theoretical knowledge and practical wisdoms: '*You can't just hop right into it. If you were just*

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3 *thrown out of college and you started seeing an extraction straight away, sure you*
4 *wouldn't know what to do.'* (Respondent H). For another, the timing of placement was
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unsuited to her academic assessment schedule however: *'I've completed all my modules now, it's not going to benefit me that greatly. Having said that, with professional practise, it did aid me greatly in that respect.'* (Respondent F). Her deepened sense of having joined a professional community was shared by most of the participants, as evidenced in most of the reflective learning journals.

Supervisors generally played a crucial role in enabling this, by fostering 'deep learning' methods (Mansfield, 2001) pre-placement. Building trust was a key issue: the usual frameworks of academia might not always provide sufficiently robust systems of support (Boud and Middleton, 2003) for those 'out' on placement: *'I didn't realise how fast you needed to be....the profession itself is quite fast-paced, because you're hopping from case to case.'* (Respondent E). Self-sufficiency and emotional resilience were therefore paramount: *...keep yourself busy. Just keep asking do you need anything done. ...it's not really about the time. It's about getting it right so you don't make any mistakes or anything.* (Respondent D). The realities of the graduate labour market (Mason et al, 2006) were also acknowledged: *'I'm literally not going to go from my placement to being offered a job in the HSE. That's never going to happen.'* (Respondent D). If placement is seen as a simple fast-track into employment however, this can engender unrealistic expectations. As one noted,

...before I did it, I did think that maybe I might gain some benefit from possibly working on cases or putting together files for my mentor, but it never came around to that. I never did any of that. So academically I don't know did it help me....(Respondent E)

The consequences of placement can be profound, with one learner reflecting afterwards: *'although I did really enjoy it, and I think that it was very worthwhile to do... it has changed my mind about what I want to do after I finish studying.'* (Respondent F). Another indicated that opportunities for learning had been missed *'...they kind of forgot that I was brand new into it, and I had never experienced it before. A few times they would ask me to do such and such, and I'm going "what?"* (Respondent G). Rigorous pre-placement preparation should help minimise confusion or anxiety and clarify expectations.:

We were only given two weeks at the beginning of the year to sort out a placement which wasn't very helpful. I think if we had been told about it maybe the previous year, or the previous semester even, we would have had a better chance to get something secured. (Respondent F).

Looking beyond traditional settings could perhaps provide more options for students: *'... there's so many different career paths that a law student could take, I've discovered now. So, if we had been maybe more informed...'* (Respondent F). Form and content matter also: a half-day per week offered less scope than a block-style, 30-hours per week placement. *'...you would be more engaged with it...have a better experience, rather than having to just spend one day here and there.'* (Respondent F). In sum, it is important to acknowledge that, like learners, not all placement opportunities are created equal ((Freestone et al, 2006; Quinn et al, 2013). A number of issues were raised, which underpin several of the recommendations.

5. Discussion of findings

Student perspectives clearly matter. As Respondent A succinctly summarised: *'We're just learning new skills.'* This simple statement may be read in various ways: it may denote scepticism, disinterest, or a reluctance to attend placement, or indeed suggest a resigned, passive acceptance of the necessary limitations attaching to it. Here however, it signified a highly willing enthusiasm to observe and take part in all of the activities on offer, however mundane or unpleasant.⁷ As Shagini (2018) has noted, the ability of graduates to adapt is perhaps now a paramount one, given how global, increasingly perennial austerities (Zelenev, 2017) are impacting upon job markets, workplaces and the already slightly hazy concept of the 'graduate premium' (Cooke et al, 2019). Any such ambiguity should be avoided however between learner-workers, HEIs and placement providers: ad hoc delivery carries much risk:

'When you've nothing to do, it drags out...I could be learning something completely different to what another girl is learning in a different pharmacy... people who are taking in students for placement should have a program, where this day they learn about such and such, because it was all over the place.' (Respondent D).

It is important to ensure

'....better contact with the mentors. ... the way I took it was that the academic mentor and the business mentor would meet to discuss things, by the phone or whatever. And I didn't think I'd have very much involvement in that. ...it was just quite confusing for me.' (Respondent E)

More proactive, emotionally resilient students may enjoy greater independence as part of their 'whole learning' (Mowrer, 1960) experiences, but not all will necessarily be able to cope with the unfamiliar demands of the professional workplace. Base level three-way agreements between student, college and placement provider (Sheridan and

⁷ Significantly, she was the only participant to be offered a job by their placement provider.

Linehan, 2011) are key to ensuring consistency and high-level pastoral care, maintaining learner motivation, and promoting personal agency (Eraut 2007, 420). A high level of 'appropriate risk management and minimisation processes' (Orrell et al, 1999) could prevent the use of overly-demanding (or indeed too-banal) tasks that might easily damage morale. Close monitoring, with visitation and observation at the start, end, and mid-way points is clearly preferable to a student-led 'signing off on tasks' approach. Several reflective learning journal entries were lacking in specific, task-relevant details, and devoid of meaningful reflection, suggesting perhaps some lack of communication between all concerned.

That said, formal settings (e.g. the office or court room) can also make it difficult for learners to do much more than simply observe what is occurring around them. Some struggled with seeing themselves as learner-workers, whilst 'out' on placement, wishing either to be treated as akin to an employee or to return to the supportive familiarity of the campus environment. Clarifying the importance of observational learning, pre-placement, could therefore also prove very useful, especially where low student self-confidence, or previous negative experience on placement might be a factor. It is worth noting that placement experiences may be affected by - indeed give rise to - a wide range of potential inequalities, with prospective employers perhaps making unconscious value judgements as to what the most employable student might look – or behave - like, to the disadvantage of students from a certain background (Allen et al, 2013). With ever-widening access, there is a burgeoning need for more holistic support from tutors, mentors and placement providers. It can be difficult for some students to understand or appreciate the types of learning processes involved in work placement (Freestone et al, 2006, 238). This has been borne out here, where a quarter of the participants did not fully engage with the reflective learning process,

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3 opting instead to list out their weekly or daily activities rather than analysing or
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5 evaluating their own emotional or psychological approaches to the tasks. This
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7 suggests some degree of misunderstanding over the merits of the observational brief,
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9 which can offer front-row views (and back-stage networking opportunities) provided
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11 that students are sufficiently well prepared in advance, and able to grasp that their
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13 likely role in will often necessarily be very prescribed, if not minimal.
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18 Rather than striving or seeking to 'keep up' with fully qualified professionals, it may be
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20 more apposite and beneficial to observe and learn the norms of workplace etiquette.
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22 Most of the learners involved in this study realised pre-placement that their individual
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24 limitations - lack of knowledge or practical experience - would necessitate close
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26 monitoring and limiting of their activities, to ensure their own or others' safety, and to
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28 preserve the placement provider's professional and reputational standards. The
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30 specific requirements of the chosen career pathway (in terms of e.g. health and safety,
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32 legal or ethical aspects) perhaps require significant additional inputs (instruction, extra
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34 training) from workplace mentors from outside of the HEI, pre-placement. This could
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36 serve to reassure tutors, learners and future employers that industry involvement has
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38 been maximised, and relevant. Pre-embedding sharp awareness of what their roles
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40 and remits are likely to be should also reduce the potential risk of students feeling they
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42 have perhaps been left alone to face unfamiliar, frightening settings, or to seek out
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44 suitable tasks. They may derive greater meaning from what is happening around them
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46 – and indeed *to* them, in terms of their workplace learning, emotional development,
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48 and sense of becoming the 'ideal graduate' (Cable and Willets, 2012).
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56 Significantly, some respondents tended to use very different terms to describe their
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58 placements: those who were disappointed or fearful spoke of being cast aside or
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3 'thrown in at the deep end.' Others – who generally had a more positive experience –
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5 referred with considerable pride to having proactively 'jumped in.' Strikingly, two of the
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7 were respondents tasked with identical placement activities: one saw basic cleaning
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9 as potentially exploitative and pointless (in terms of not bringing any real learning gains
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11 or academic knowledge) while the other took great delight in contributing to a safe,
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13 pleasant work environment and indicating a heightened sense of professional
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15 'belongingness' (Yorke, 2013). The 'mundane' nature of the work set her apart, she
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17 felt, from the other staff in a positive way, serving as an important element of the
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19 working day.
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25 Arguably, there is still some level of disconnect between the qualities that employers
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27 value, and the skills regarded as high priority 'learning gains' within academia. Two
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29 respondents were 'put off' certain career pathways as a result of their placement
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31 experience, by having been tasked either with too little or too much activity or
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33 autonomy; two others seized the potential for active learning and personal
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35 development that often accompanies departures from the comfort zone. Upon
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37 reflection, post-placement, several changed their earlier opinions, describing their
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39 earlier experiences (with the benefit of hindsight) as having offered them the chance
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41 to 'leap' forwards, and an opportunity to 'jump in.' High level, open-minded, innate - or
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43 learned - enthusiasm seems to offer the best means of gap-bridging. Willingness to
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45 experience all aspects of one's future profession, including those mundane tasks
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47 which may at first appear somewhat pointless, puzzling, or non-essential (e.g. cleaning
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49 up, researching, note-taking, chatting to colleagues, observing professional others) is
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51 often down to emotional maturity: this is perhaps the most crucial 'employability skill'
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53 that graduates can possess and demonstrate (Udayar et al, 2018; MacCann et al,
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55 2019). The degree to which such an attribute might be developed via classroom
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learning, is perhaps limited. Those students who are not inherently keen on completing certain academic tasks, attending classes, engaging with learning activities, or embracing new challenges, will often also lack the will or ability to acquire essential, underpinning professional knowledge or skills. Put bluntly, it is difficult to see them gaining significantly from the work-placement experience, especially if this is framed loosely as a non-compulsory informal 'add-on' to their degree studies.

An assessed, pre-placement training module could serve to focus and 'bootcamp' the basic skills needed for workplace learning such as e.g. time-keeping, communication, etiquette, and profession-specific knowledge and behaviours. It could offer substantive, career-specific insights into the nature and purpose(s) of their chosen profession, analysing these against a framework of norms, ethics, legal and policy frameworks and perhaps wider considerations such as definitions of professionalism or the ever-increasing need for sustainability under the UN's Sustainability Development Goal (Zelenev, 2017). Such an approach looks to expand the notion of employability training beyond basic preparations for the workplace, to include the emotional and psychological aspects of being employed within industries or professions. As Freestone et al, (2006, 238) argued, the 'learning experience' tends to evolve over time: so too should the way in which HEIs and workplaces support learners.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study has attempted to capture how undergraduate students' self-perceptions might change via work placement, as they struggle or cope with the various challenges (real, perceived, or underestimated) of the professional workplace. In terms of adding to the existing literature referred to here (both empirical and

theoretical) its findings clearly suggest that for learner-worker students, a strong sense of identity (Irving-Bell, 2019) is often fundamental to success, despite its potentially fragile nature; once damaged or lost, this may be difficult to recover, to the extent that the student on placement may be tempted to change their chosen pathway, or to leave academic study altogether. That said, the data still suggests that tangible placement benefits are still very likely to include enhanced opportunities for networking and the gaining of core skills needed to engage with members of their future profession. As Frankham (2016) has further argued, looking beyond the scope and duration of the degree is essential, if the aim is to somehow craft – or at the very least support – the emotional growth of the ‘ideal graduate’ (Blackwell et al, 2000; Boud and Middleton, 2003; Mason et al, 2006; Cable and Willets, 2012).

At best, learner-workers gain from placements a higher-level emotional maturity and hone resilience and acknowledge an enhanced sense of their own burgeoning professionalism and ‘work-readiness.’⁸ In return, HEIs should find a ‘seeding back’ of key employability innovations into their own academic curricula as students and employers offer constructive feedback and practical suggestions for improvements via honest reflections upon their lived experiences. Any checklist for pre-placement training and concurrent pastoral support should address profession-specific issues, not least perhaps the following:

- a. Define and agree well in advance the learner-worker’s remit, role[s] and responsibilities during placement

⁸ Even in worst-case scenarios, the discovery that they are not best suited to their originally chosen career pathway, affords them the early opportunity to change course/direction.

- b. Establish clearly the nature and purpose[s] of placement (e.g. informal mini apprenticeship, or more structured internship with strictly set learning and/or practical outcomes such as e.g. a written research report or reflections-led presentation)
- c. Identify/plan out the nature of learning whilst on placement (observational or supervised activities, independent working on set project or research) as dictated by workplace context (highly formal, informal or mixed)
- d. Signpost clearly why and how professional/workplace behaviours and regulatory frameworks will be adhered to (e.g. laws and policies, norms, ethics, time-keeping, dress-codes, language)
- e. Highlight in advance the scope for wider, more holistic 'learning gains' or assessment outcomes via work placement (e.g. transferable employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, team-working, mental resilience, emotional maturity, flexibility)

Thorough pre-placement preparation must be aimed at 'embedding competencies' (Rees et al, 2006) and accustoming students to the likely (and indeed unlikely) mind-challenging events and scenarios that might arise within their future careers. Ensuring that students have had a good grounding in the norms and demands of their chosen profession or industry could prevent low self-confidence and identify/address unspoken anxieties, by highlighting potential limitations and knowledge gaps, pre-placement. Maintaining close contact, consistent monitoring and scrutiny during placement are also key to building emotional stamina and mental resilience, by preventing or alleviating student disillusionment or confusion, permitting authentic

reflective learning and building closer ties with potential employers: as one learner-worker quite nicely summarised,

'Take them on, teach them properly, and then at least you know there's going to be good qualified people out there.' (Respondent G, post-placement)

Degree; Duration	Code	Prior Exp.	Pre- placement	Post- placement	Reflective Learning Diary	Learning gain	Key Recommendations
Vet. Nursing 30 hr block	A	Yes, good	Slight anxiety, much enthusiasm	Very positive	Detailed, task-rich, sense of pride and achievement, belongingness	Yes – substantial - Self- confidence; Belongingness *offered employment	Longer duration; More placement opportunities
Vet Nursing 30 hr block	B	No	Very cynical, reluctant, high anxiety, 'exploitation' fears	Relief, revised attitude re: placements	Limited, brief entries, check-listing approach	Some - improved soft skills, professional behaviours, subject knowledge	More prep; more support during placement from HEI; 'avoid unpaid internships'
Pharmacy Technician 60 hours, 2 x 30 hour blocks; Hospital; Community	C	Yes, adequate	Fearful, worried over finance, hours, remit, Role, reputation	Sense of 'having survived'; slightly more positive	Fairly detailed; anxiety highlighted, 'boredom'; 'exclusion'	Some Eg Terminology; Workplace etiquette; Change of career pathway now planned	Much more support and reassurance from workplace mentors, tutors, colleagues; define roles, offer more suitable tasks
Pharmacy Technician 60 hours, 2 x 30 hours blocks; community, hospital	D	Yes, Negative	Some anxiety, fear but pragmatic; previously had negative experience, changed course as a result	Relief, annoyance at some aspects; Insufficient challenge but sense of achievement	Limited; some gaps, task- based, checklist approach	Unsure as to value of experience; knowledge of industry gained, add-on to academic knowledge but some sense of wasted opportunity	Some more prep/training needed pre- placement; better communication between HEI and workplace; more challenging tasks needed

Law 1 day per week, semester long – courtroom	E	No	Extremely anxious, fearful; some confusion over role and remit; keen to network	Grateful, keen sense of pride; much insight into profession gained; Valuable experience	Very detailed; useful focus on psychological and emotional responses; progress outlined	Much value derived; keen to join profession; academic skills gained; Clear sense of belongingness; much networking, insights into profession; Self-confidence	Avoid confusion pre-placement over hours, tasks, roles; more support from HEI during placement; clearer communication re assessment aspects
Law 1 day per week, semester long; Office-based	F	Yes - positive	Worry re travel, funds, time management	Sense of achievement; some frustration re limitations to role/remit; Some skills not utilised; 'watching brief' not useful	Fairly detailed re: tasks; some focus on emotional responses; coped well with challenges	Academic knowledge gained, practical knowledge enriched - theoretical; communication with clients and other professionals; networking, insights into legal profession	Duration, could be longer; could widen opportunities beyond 'office' e.g. charities, NGOs, research post; Timing - earlier in course would be better e.g. for LLB exam prep; role could be more substantive /client-facing
Dental Nursing 30 hour block	G	No	Slight anxiety; very keen to begin	Highly positive experience	Detailed daily record of tasks and emotions	Much practical knowledge gained; professional skills; knowledge	Some more prep needed; overall, very positive
Dental Nursing 30 hour block	H	No	Very nervous, yet excited; some uncertainty over placement location	Strong sense of achievement; Keen to join profession	Checklist approach; some mention of emotions; some gaps	Networking; self-confidence; gained knowledge; professional ethics	Avoid confusion over placement – earlier release of info on venue to minimise student anxiety

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